

Tricky year for avalanche forecasts

Wasatch slide causes year's first avalanche fatality between Millcreek and Big Cottonwood

Allan Davis, 48, of Salt Lake County, was killed Saturday around 6:30 p.m. when he was buried in an avalanche that slid through the Gobbler's Knob area near Big Cottonwood and Millcreek canyons.

By the time the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue team arrived on scene the two men and two women from Salt Lake City, who were skiing with Davis at the time of the slide, which was 300-feet wide and almost 1,500 feet in length, had recovered his dead body.

"They were real careful," Faulkner said, about the skiers, adding that all five were experienced backcountry users and well equipped for an emergency.

She said avalanche danger in the area that day was "moderate," and

Davis happened to ski, one of few risky slopes in the canyon.

This was the first avalanche death in Utah this year, Faulkner said, adding that the Wasatch Front and Back have seen many close calls over the past few weeks, both human triggered and natural.

Responsible for much of the Wasatch Back, the Uintas and the rest of Summit County, on Saturday, volunteers with the Summit County Search and Rescue Team claimed another victory when a 54-year-old man, was located near Whitney Dam in the Uintas.

Sheriff Dave Edmunds said the man was separated from his snowmobiling party for more than 12 hours during which time a Utah Department of Public Safety helicopter was dispatched to assist the search.

He added that the victim was believed to have had knowledge of the area and was well prepared. He was not injured while lost.

The Utah Avalanche Forecast Center is forecasting moderate avalanche conditions for the Wasatch and Uintas, especially where loads of snow, have collected on steep peaks due to wind and other conditions. Weak snow base layers, as a result of January's thaw continue to plague many of the slopes in the Wasatch and Uintas, and an unstable lower layer was responsible for Saturday's deadly slide.

Forecasters say avalanche danger in the Wasatch right now, exists only in certain "localized" areas and they said it is important to keep up daily on the changing conditions. Contact: (435) 658-5512 or visit www.avalanche.org/uac. For a weekend avalanche forecast for the western Uintas call (800) 648-7433.

-- Pat Parkinson

Fierce Storm Adds to Avalanche Risk

Skier killed in slide took all precautions

BY KEVIN CANTERA

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

One day after a Salt Lake County man died in a backcountry avalanche on the Wasatch Range, safety officials warned that Sunday's weather could raise the likelihood of further snowslides.

Allan Davis, 48, was swept away and buried Saturday evening when a 100-foot wide swath of unstable snow broke away from the northwest face of Gobbler's Knob, a 10,400-foot ridge between Porter Fork and Alexander Basin in Mill Creek Canyon.

Davis, one of a group of five skiers, was buried beneath about 5 feet of snow in the 5:30 p.m. avalanche, said Salt Lake County Sheriff's Deputy Peggy Faulkner.

His companions, two men



The Salt Lake Tribune

and two women who were not injured in the slide, freed Davis from the snow and called for help on a cell phone, Faulkner said. A medical helicopter dropped a team of rescuers into the area, where they were able to find the survivors, who already had determined that their companion was dead.

Davis was an expert skier and a backcountry wizard well aware of the dangers of the mountains, said Bruce

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Tremper, director of the U.S. Forest Service's Utah Avalanche Center.

"He was just an amazing guy" who often had volunteered his time to help avalanche forecasters distribute information, Tremper said. "There were only a few localized places where people could trigger an avalanche and they just happened to find one. . . . It makes me pretty sad."

In fact, the entire group was well prepared for the treacherous winter conditions of the mountain hinterlands, Faulkner said.

"They were wearing [locator] beacons, and they really watched closely for any sign of instability. They were just unable to predict what was coming," Faulkner said. "It does demonstrate how dangerous it can be up there."

Search and rescue personnel guided the four survivors,

who were not identified, out of the backcountry early Sunday, a few hours before Davis' body was recovered by deputies, Faulkner said.

Davis was the first person killed from injuries suffered during a snowslide in a winter season that has seen more than 90 Wasatch Range avalanches unintentionally triggered by skiers, snowboarders or snowmobilers since Nov. 8, according to a report from the Utah Avalanche Center.

"We had 63 unintentional, human-triggered [avalanches] in three weeks in January. I'm sure we set some kind of record," Tremper said.

Another 60 or so snow slides have been intentionally triggered, or occurred naturally since November.

In Saturday's slide, a hard slab of snow and ice between 1 and 2 feet deep broke away from the mountain at an elevation of about 10,100 feet and roared nearly 1,600 feet down the steep slope, tearing up trees and brush. The slide fanned out to a width of nearly 350 feet in places, and debris piled up "funneled into a narrow gully," said Tremper, who examined the slide area Sunday.

"It started out as a relatively small slide [but] it soon

involved an entire bowl below the ridge and picked up a large volume of snow," he said.

A Pacific storm front that rolled onto the Wasatch Front on Sunday, changing rain to snow and bringing wind gusts close to 70 mph, had forecasters predicting further instability.

High winds tend to distribute snow in dense and inconsistent drifts along terrain features, and fresh, wet snow typically does not bond well to older snowpacks, which are often slick and icy on the surface. Because the Wasatch Mountains have received a relatively light blanket of snow this winter, the peaks are abnormally vulnerable to anything — human or otherwise — that can trigger a slide.

"Drought years are especially dangerous," Tremper said. "A thick snowpack is quite stable. In a drought year the snowpack is thin, and thin snow is weak snow."

Anyone planning to venture into the mountain backcountry is urged to first check for avalanche advisories, which are available by calling 801-364-1581, or on the Internet at

<http://www.avalanche.org/~uac>.
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